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CHARLES FRANCIS ADAMS

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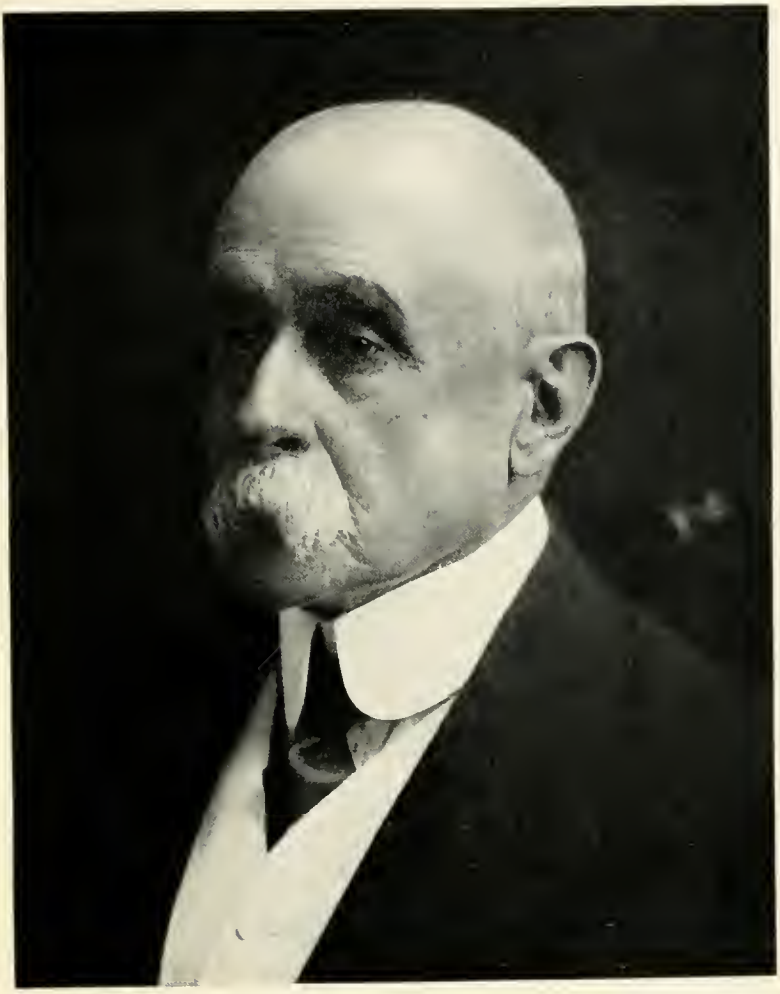

CHARLES FRANCIS ADAMS

Charles Francis Adams, the second of the name, was born in Quincy, on the 27th day of May, 1835, and was the third child of Charles F. Adams the elder, and Abigail (Brooks) Adams, the latter being the youngest child of Peter C. Brooks, and Ann (Gorham) Brooks, both well-known families of the Boston of a century ago.

By the marriage of Charles F. the elder, with Miss Brooks, the rough, farmer blood of Adams, in this branch, was, for the first time, mingled with the better bred New England stock, an advantage that was apparent in some of the children of the marriage, though not in the subject of this memoir, whose character combined the primitive manners, and want of cultivated judgment that caused Mr. Morse, in his life of John Q. Adams, to describe him as the possessor of a generally negative magnetism.

On his mother's side the younger Adams was therefore a nephew of the scholarly and eloquent Everett, and the dignified Frothingham.

Mr. Adams' branch of the family was descended from the fourth son of the original Adams, who settled in this country, of whose many sons the first and third died childless, the second was the ancestor of Mr. Joseph Adams, late of Dorchester, whose oldest surviving male descendant is George Henry Adams of West Newton, Massachusetts.

From his boyhood, Charles, the younger, manifested all the many signs of want of clearness of judgment that were hereafter to be the prominent traits of his character, and when, at the age of fourteen, or fifteen, he was present at family gatherings, and different subjects of common interest were discussed, he listened to the opinions of those about him, and when his elders had expressed themselves, would dogmatically lay down some wholly contrary opinion, of which his mother used to remark indulgently: "Well, that is like Charles, but you know, nobody pays any attention to Charles."

This spirit grew with years, and while a student at Adams Academy, in Quincy, of which his grandfather was the founder, it caused him to be regarded with dislike.

On completing his course in Quincy, he entered Harvard College, in 1852, graduating in 1856, at the middle of his class, with a record of great industry in his studies, and took up the study of the Law, being admitted as a member of the Suffolk Bar in 1858. The characteristic of contrariness, that at all times dominated him, unfitted him for a successful advocate, so he continued to pursue different branches of study, and to express himself, from time to time, in print, on various topics of the day, until the breaking out of the Civil war, when he volunteered as an officer of cavalry, and followed the troops through the war, being mustered out in July, 1865, with the rank of brevet Brigadier-General of volunteers.

His command throughout the Rebellion was a company of colored Cavalry, a position involving the relations between two races, differing in every particular, and requiring a delicacy of conduct on many points, for which his character and want of judgment unfitted him and which caused his relations with his men to be often strained, thereby greatly impairing their efficiency for service, and it soon became difficult for him and them to act together with any effect.

There were, during the war, many citizens who had volunteered for service from patriotic motives, who had seen no previous service of any kind, and were ignorant of all military tactics, but who owing to individual bravery, the general confusion in the early stages of the struggle, and some political power, rose with amazing rapidity; and for whose proper action in battle some more skilled general had to be detailed to direct their movements, and keep them where their services would be of value, and Adams belonged to this class of officer.

In person Mr. Adams was much below the average height, somewhat knockneed and short legged, which gave him always a curiously swaying gait; his head was large in proportion to his body, the eyes set close together, the nose long and sharp, mouth firmly set, a high narrow forehead and short neck; all of which made his personality unattractive and lacking in that genial warmth of character so necessary for success in life, and undoubtedly accounted for his want of power in military matters.

The war ended, Mr. Adams returned to Quincy and opened an office in Boston, occupying himself, in collaboration with his brother Henry, with the preparation of his first literary effort entitled "Chapters on Erie," compiled from various newspaper articles published in the press of the time, relating to the conduct of Jay Gould and James Fiske, and their gigantic scheme for the wholesale robbery of the original Erie Railroad. This work needs no special comment and has long been out of print.

Meantime his relations with the townsmen of Quincy, where he resided, became unpleasant, the cause being his attitude on the question, brought forward by the latter, of the propriety of applying to the state legislature for a City charter.

Mr. Adams contended that the town form of government was the best for the community, and when he found the sentiment of a large majority of his fellow townsmen was against him, and they finally voted to become a city, he removed in dudgeon to the town of Lincoln, where he purchased an estate, and severed all connection with the home of his ancestors.

In the year 1884, the Union Pacific Railroad was largely owned in Boston, and it's affairs were in bad condition; his book on Erie having come to the attention of some of the directors, Mr. Adams was elected president of the road, in the hope that he would be able to revive its broken credit, and increase the value of its stock, by proper business management. Among its many debts was that for an original construction loan to the United States government, then overdue, and for the payment of which there was no fund available.

Mr. Adams was not a skilled organizer and had no real knowledge of railroad management, and at the same time refused to take any advice; his first effort was one to obtain the consent of Congress to cancel the debt to the government without payment, and had the matter been handled with tact and caution, it is probable he would have succeeded. It was impossible for Mr. Adams to so handle it however, and the affairs of the road grew steadily worse.

The directors, who had been the means of his election, tried to advise him of what should be done, but in vain, and the condition of the road growing steadily worse, and the president declining to receive advice or suggestions from the directors was asked to resign, and, on the election of his successor, the road again began to prosper.

In 1893, shortly after Mr. Cleveland's second inauguration, an effort was made by some well-known men, who knew that Mr. Adams had always advocated the democratic cause, to have him appointed American Minister to the Court of London; success seemed probable and would have been most gratifying to him, as a follower of his father in that position, but his previous want of propriety defeated him.

A short time before Mr. Adams had written some letters of a personal nature, to a younger relative on a matter that in no way concerned him.

The letters were submitted to a member of the executive com-

mittee of a small social organization in New York, for his judgment, and pronounced by him unwarranted and unworthy of notice.

It so happened that the latter gentleman was a prominent political leader in New York, and when Mr. Adams' name became prospectively successful as candidate for the English appointment, he asked to borrow the letters, for a few days.

They were forwarded to him, at his request, and when received were shown as an evidence of the writer's inability to properly fill such a position. It was later given to another.

In the year 1895, Mr. George Ellis, for some years President of the Massachusetts Historical Society, died, and the election of a new president was in order.

The proper person for the position was the late Robert C. Winthrop, then in the prime of life, not only because of his historical attainments and his well-known name, but also because his father had filled it for many years with great distinction. Mr. Adams, however, being the senior Vice President, desired the position should be given to him, and although in his memoir of Mr. Winthrop, written some years after, he states that he urged the latter to accept the place, Mr. Winthrop, himself, in talking of the matter, failed to recall ever being given the opportunity, by Mr. Adams, to occupy the position.

In 1893, when the so-called "Free Silver" heresy was advocated by a little knot of fanatics, Mr. Adams at once became an ardent disciple of that delusion. Although such a theory as free Silver was against every principle of sound finance, credit, and business sense, his characteristic obstinacy blinded him to the cynical indifference and recklessness of its advocates and real authors, and to its plain elements of ruin for the nation, and he labored, and spoke, on all occasions, for its adoption by the country, and was one of the last to let the question drop.

At the meetings of the Historical Society, over which Mr. Adams as President presided, he generally brought forth some unusual theories upon well-settled historical subjects, and to maintain them was obliged to ignore previously determined facts, to the amusement of those members present, and in 1908, after a few days' visit to Greece, he returned with a plan of his own of the battle of Marathon, and a description wholly different from any before suggested, which swept aside the statements of Herodotus, and all subsequent historians, in order to support his erroneous views.

Early in 1908 he was invited by the committee in charge of the erection of a statue, to the memory of the leader of the confederate forces of the Rebellion, to deliver the address at its

dedication in Richmond, Virginia. There is no doubt that such a monument would have been very distasteful to General Lee, who was greatly mortified, at the close of his life, at the part he had taken during the war, and sorrow that such a struggle had taken place oppressed him until his death, and it is also certain that for an officer of the Union army to take any part in such a ceremony, and above all a central place, was, to say the least, in hopelessly bad taste, as was admitted by both sides, but the desire to be conspicuous and the conviction that whatever he did was right, without regard to the usually accepted ethics in such a case, led Mr. Adams to overstep the limits of good taste, in accepting and responding to the invitation, by delivering the address.

In the latter part of 1911 Mr. Adams produced a book called "Studies, Diplomatic and Military," in which the principal object sought was to discredit the military skill and success of General George Washington in the Revolutionary War, and to prove that the final success of the Colonies in their struggle for independence, was owed, not to Washington's efforts and guidance, but to the blunders of the British officers.

It must first be remembered that Mr. Adams was without military training, his only knowledge of war having been gained in service as a volunteer during the Civil war, which service was never of more than negative value, and often a disadvantage to the cause; and also that his well-known desire to belittle the deeds of others, inevitably prevented his forming any judgment of value, and had his deductions been tenable it would not have been left to him to form them and to enlighten the world with them for the first time one hundred and thirty years after the war.

The American people do not approve of tardy injustice, and the fame of the great American does not depend on the approval of those men, who, like Mr. Adams, have themselves failed through life, owing to want of proper judgment and knowledge of human nature, and the book was not a success, bringing only ridicule to the author.

In May 1865, at the close of the war, Mr. Adams married Miss Mary Ogden in Newport, Rhode Island, a member of the well-known New York family of that name, and by her he had five children, all of whom, as they grew up, learned to bear with patience, the many trials to which such a nature as his subjected them; they found their interests and pleasures outside the family circle, as far as possible, and apparently were glad of any excuse that took them temporarily from home.

The writings of Mr. Adams, as well as his remarks in public,

were usually tinged with egotism, intolerance, and want of charity for others, and often proved inaccurate from these defects, as for example when he wrote the inscriptions for the tablets to the two Presidents in the stone church in Quincy, where he made several errors in historical facts, and on being reminded of them, he corrected one and left the others untouched.

At a meeting of the Harvard Club of New York, in 1911, being asked as one of the older guests to make a short address and reminded that such remarks were limited in time to fifteen minutes, he rose and continued speaking far beyond the limit, those present leaving, meantime, until at his close very few remained, at which he expressed great annoyance.

The jealousy of others, that prompts such conduct as guided his life makes them as miserable in secret as they seem to wish to make others, and this was fatally true in his case. When an educated, industrious, and apparently sober-minded man, who has passed middle age, lends himself to a policy of belittling the work and conduct of others, and condemning them unheard, there is no explanation of his conduct, except on the ground that consciousness of its injustice, and an inherent jealousy of all whom he feels are his intellectual superiors, warps his judgment, and leads him to make such mistakes, causing him to make his life a failure, and his industry a regret, that it should be used to so small a purpose.

In the New York Tribune of the latter part of 1890 there appeared a reprint of a previously issued pamphlet entitled, "A case of Hereditary Bias," commenting on a member of the Adams family, as a historian and faithfully setting forth the grave defects in the family character that produced such unfortunate defects in Mr. Adams' life; it is one of the most graphic summaries of hereditary defects ever published in America.

That intolerance of all opinions but their own that was so marked a characteristic of the early settlers of Massachusetts, and which caused so much trouble and ill feeling among them, both before and after the appearance of John Wheelwright, and Anne Hutchinson, was engendered by the same spirit that survived in Mr. Adams to which may be attributed his want of success and harmony with his surroundings in life.

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